
**Children & Family Services
Committee**

HB 3152

Brief Description: Establishing the family assessment response demonstration program.

Sponsors: Representatives Kagi, Walsh, Roberts, Haler and Dickerson.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Creates the family assessment response demonstration project for responding to non-emergent referrals of child abuse and neglect.

Hearing Date: 2/1/06

Staff: Sydney Forrester (786-7120).

Background:

Child protective services (CPS) systems allowing for a differential response to allegations of child abuse or neglect determined to be low-risk are commonly called alternative response systems. Alternative response systems reflect a belief that one approach does not meet the needs of every case. An alternate response emphasizes an assessment of the family's needs and provision of services to prevent future maltreatment. An alternative response system does not focus on determining whether specific allegations can be substantiated.

The National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), in 2001, researched alternative response systems in six states and compared children in each state who were referred to an alternative response with children who were referred to a traditional investigation. Among NCANDS's findings was that implementation of an alternative response system reflects an intention to serve children and families who appear to be at lower risk. Findings were consistent with the expectation that families' circumstances may not warrant a traditional investigation response but that those families can benefit from some intervention to prevent future maltreatment.

One of the state programs examined by NCANDS was Minnesota's Family Assessment Response Model, which also was a topic of a work session of the House Children and Family Services Committee during November 2005. The Minnesota program began as a pilot in Olmstead County, was later expanded to 20 other counties in the state, and was implemented state-wide in 2005. Evaluation of Minnesota's pilot between 2001 and 2004 found that their alternative response system:

- 1) increased the number of families who receive services;
- 2) enhanced child safety and lowered re-referrals rates;
- 3) decreased the need for more intensive services in the future;
- 4) resulted in more family satisfaction with state intervention; and
- 5) was cost effective.

Families served through the Minnesota family assessment model were more likely to report they were treated fairly and in a friendly manner by CPS workers and that the family was better off because of the experience.

Summary of Bill:

The Family Assessment Response demonstration program is created. A *family assessment* is a comprehensive assessment of child safety, risk of subsequent child maltreatment, and family strengths and needs based on available and relevant information. The Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) is directed to select one or more demonstration sites for implementation. To the extent feasible, site selection should reflect the geographic and demographic diversity of the state.

Program Structure

Upon receipt of a referral of child abuse or neglect, the DSHS will determine whether to conduct an investigation or a family assessment. A family assessment is the preferred response for reports determined to be non-emergent and not alleging substantial child endangerment. The DSHS must consider issues of child safety, parental cooperation, and the need for immediate response when determining whether to proceed with a traditional investigation or conduct a family assessment.

The family assessment must include a face-to-face contact with the child and his or her primary care-giver within 72 hours. The contact must be sufficient to assess the immediate safety of the child. In addition to assessing the child's safety, the contact also is intended to determine the family's immediate support needs and to engage the family in addressing concerns regarding the child's health and safety.

A full family assessment will be completed within 30 days. Upon completion, a family assessment worker will determine what services are needed to address the safety of the child and other family members, and the risks of child maltreatment. Within 10 days of completing the assessment, the family assessment worker will notify the parent of the child regarding availability of services to address child safety concerns. The worker and the family may jointly agree to services, however the DSHS may seek court intervention to order services if the family refuses to engage and complete services. At the conclusion of the case, the DSHS will document the outcome of the family assessment response, including a description of services and the removal or reduction of risks to child safety.

If at any time during the assessment there is reason to believe a serious threat to the child's safety exists, the DSHS must begin an investigation. The DSHS also may shift from an investigation to a family assessment, but must document the reasons for terminating any investigation and notify any law enforcement agency conducting a joint investigation.

Program Guidelines

To the extent resources are available, the DSHS shall provide training and resources to assist family assessment workers in implementing the following guidelines designed to minimize confrontation, enhance cooperation, and enhance the family's ability to take care of itself.

- 1) Contacts with families should focus on their situation, problems, and needs in a positive and non-confrontational manner;
- 2) Whenever possible, meetings should be with the family as a unit;
- 3) Unless doing so would compromise the child safety assessment, workers should request permission to interview a child prior to conducting the interview;
- 4) Family members should be involved in problem solving consistent with the safety needs of the children;
- 5) When possible, services and assistance should fit the broader needs and situation of the family by linking them to other community resources and supports;
- 6) Unless an investigation is started, the primary focus of the family assessment is to help the family identify and access services and resources to reduce risks and enhance child well-being; and
- 7) If an investigation is started after a family assessment is initiated, the family assessment worker should refer the case to a CPS social worker for the investigation.

Program Evaluation

The Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) will study the family assessment response demonstration program and report to the Legislature by January 31, 2009. The WSIPP and the DSHS will define the data to be gathered and maintained. At a minimum, the study must evaluate child safety outcomes and re-referrals to CPS.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on 1/23/06.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.